

St. Peter Lutheran Church
Dec. 28, 2025
The Festival of the Holy Innocents
Matthew 2:13-18

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, looking for the newborn King. Having stopped first in Jerusalem, the wise men had continued to Bethlehem, found the Child, and worshipped him. They were supposed to bring back word concerning the Child to Herod but were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they had gone home another way. We will hear their story on the Feast of Epiphany, but today, we hear what follows.

When [the wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.

Joseph, who had been obedient to the angel of the Lord’s previous word in a dream concerning taking his pregnant betrothed wife to him instead of divorcing her, is now obedient to the angel of the Lord again. **When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”**

The Lord Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture. Not just the direct prophecies about the Messiah, but the entirety of the Scriptures are fulfilled in Him. The history of Israel is fulfilled in Jesus. Hosea, who had originally written these words, spoke of the twelve tribes of Israel, whom God had brought out of Egypt and called his son. But Matthew says this word is fulfilled when Joseph flees to Egypt with the holy family and comes back out of Egypt after Herod’s death.

The nation of Israel had been a faithless son, but Jesus is a faithful One. When God had brought Israel out of Egypt and made them His people at Sinai by the blood of the covenant, the people had said, **“All that the LORD has said, we will do, and be obedient.”** But history proved them wrong. A short 40 days later they were shamefully worshipping a golden cow, and their hearts would often stray from the LORD and follow other gods, even the gods of the nations the LORD would drive out before them. They would be unfaithful time and time again, until the northern kingdom is conquered by Assyria. And as Jeremiah prophesied, the southern kingdom would be taken away in exile, leaving Rachel weeping for her descendants, the Benjamites, who are led off as captives with the descendants of Judah to Babylon. Rachel herself had once wept on this road to Bethlehem at the painful birth of Benjamin and was buried along the road when she died at his birth. Later, her daughters of the tribe of Benjamin wept here also, as they were led away in exile.

And yet, God promised that they would come back from the land of the enemy, He promised that there was hope for the future, and that they would return to their own country. And not only did

they come back from exile, but in the birth of Jesus, the one promised to David to sit on his throne forever had come! And now this King, Jesus, fulfills for Israel their own history, faithfully. This Son comes out of Egypt and remains faithful. He is tempted in the wilderness by the devil and does not turn away from the LORD. This Child fulfills all righteousness for Israel, finally by giving His own life for their sins.

So at Joseph's obedience, Jesus is taken safely to Egypt to wait for the fury of King Herod to pass. And Herod, **when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry.** Herod is the template of every king of the world who will not bow to Jesus. As it is written, **"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed."** Herod will not be bound to this Child as king. Herod will not acknowledge the LORD, the God of Israel. The nations raged then and they continue to rage today, and the people today continue to plot a vain thing, thinking they can cast off the bonds of the Mighty One and be free of His dominion. They kick against the goads. Their efforts are folly and come to nothing. They rise up for a season, but they are brought low. They will not escape the fury of the true King's wrath.

And sadly, as wicked kings of the earth lash out against the LORD and His Anointed, there are casualties. King Herod **sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.** How many boys were slaughtered that day? How many children were taken from their parents' arms to have their blood spilled before them? Had it been but one, it would have abundantly demonstrated the dark wickedness of those who turn against the Child born to us. But it was all of them in Bethlehem and in all its districts. None were left.

This, Matthew says, is the fulfillment of the prophecy spoken by Jeremiah about Rachel crying over her children. Yes, there was the exile of her descendants, and yes, God brought them back to Jerusalem as promised, but Jesus fulfills all the Scriptures, even the parts that had a fulfillment already. So in the death of the baby boys of Bethlehem, this Scripture was fulfilled: **"A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."** Rachel cried along the road from Ramah to Bethlehem, and Her descendants wept there going into Exile. And now, weeping is raised from this place once again as the innocent boys of Bethlehem and its districts are put to death by the agents of King Herod.

These martyred innocents of Bethlehem showed forth Christ's praise not by speaking but by dying. Taken before they reached maturity, taken as children from this world, they are among the ones **who follow the Lamb wherever He goes.** They were truly **firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.** They had done nothing against King Herod, but he killed them all the same because he hated Christ. They died as witnesses to Jesus the King.

This is the world into which Christ was born. This is the world in which we live. A world where the darkness does seem to overpower the light. A world where innocent children are taken by evil men and there is much weeping. A world where children are safe not even in the temples of their mothers' bodies and parents become their executioners. But God's promises remain. Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. Even when he was put on a cross, crucified, and buried, Easter morning came. The sins of the world were put away, nailed to his cross, and an eternal Day broke forth. Even when we face all manners of darkness in the present evil age, Christ's victory is ours. Even as the nations rage, as innocent children are killed, Christ's light scatters the darkness.

The Light of Christ is what each of us need to scatter the darkness even in our own hearts. Christ's forgiveness is the balm needed for consciences sore oppressed by past sins and horrors of our own thoughts and actions. Baptized into his death, we have the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of everlasting life. **The Lord has put away your sin. You shall not die.**

Christ the Savior is who we need when persecution comes hot and when death draws near. Jeremiah promised that though Rachel cried for her children going into exile, they would come back from the land of the enemy, so also, even as we are put to death and led like lambs to the slaughter, we have great hope in Christ—hope in the resurrection of the dead. He lays a table before us now in the presence of our enemies, the very Bread of life and cup of salvation. Whom shall we fear?

As it is written:

“For Your sake we are killed all day long;

We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The faithful Son who came out of Egypt won our salvation by His own suffering, His precious death, and His glorious resurrection. Life and salvation belong to Him. And precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. For then they are delivered forever into his marvelous light. **There is hope in your future, says the LORD.**